DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 690 UD 007 920

By-Fischer, John H.

Urban Schools: Issues in Responsiveness and Control.

Pub Date Nov 68

Note-14p.; Address presented at a Special Training Institute on Problems of School Desegregation (Teachers Coll., Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y., July 10-12, 1968)

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80

Descriptors-*Decentralization, Negroes, Public Policy, *Public Schools, Race Relations, School Community Cooperation, School Community Relationship, *School Responsibility, Slum Schools, *Urban Schools

The author, President of Teachers College, Columbia University, states his view that the arguments for school decentralization are stronger than those opposed to it. The current state of race relations in this country justifies this viewpoint which, however, should not be construed as support for segregation. Racial integration is still the ultimate goal but Negroes must have greater opportunities to "assert their own preferences, control their own destinies, and manage their own affairs." (NH)

EDO 30690

In his introductory address President John H. Fischer of Teachers College, a nationally prominent advocate of racial integration, articulates his view that "given the current state of race relations in the United States", arguments in favor of school decentralization are stronger than those against. President Fischer, who formerly was Superintendent of the Baltimore City Public Schools, declares that support for a greater measure of decentralization should not be taken as support for segregation. But before racial integration is likely to produce the benefits it could yield, black Americans must have greater opportunities to assert their own preferences, control their own destinies, and manage their own affairs.

UD 007 920

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

URBAN SCHOOLS:

ISSUES IN RESPONSIVENESS AND CONTROL

John H. Fischer, President
Teachers College, Columbia University

In education, as in other fields, too much of what we do is still based on assumptions that are no longer valid. We continue to be too much influenced by the momentum of established practice, and too little by fresh insights into the nature of people and their possibilities. We need new mechanisms and new procedures, but we need more. We must be prepared to reconsider and radically revise some of our fundamental concepts about education and about the role of the school. The wide-spread insistence that the school be made more relevant to real life stems as often as not from limited knowledge about both education and life; but, as evidence of dissatisfaction with present arrangements, the demand for greater relevance in our institutions cannot be ignored.

The issues we must consider are important not only to school people and school systems, but to the whole of American society. Much more than the technical details of

UD 007 920

school administration are involved. What happens in our schools is certain to affect the peace and progress of our communities. Almost everybody is aware of that. What is less widely understood is the effect of educational neglect on the development of individual children. In today's world, to limit a child's education is to deprive him of part of his freedom.

No one need be told that city schools everywhere need more good teachers, more leaders with imagination and courage, better techniques and teaching materials, more modern buildings and more money. But above everything else we need greater clarity about the purposes of the public schools, about their relation to the needs of our people and about their power to lift the quality of life in this country.

No small part of the trouble in city schools is due to the fact that virtually everywhere in our country, even in the large cities, the poor and the disadvantaged are a minority. For most Americans it is abundantly true that we have never had it so good. Despite gaps between what we have and what we want, the schools that most American children attend are not bad. The country over, their graduates are better prepared for life in general, and for higher education in particular, than they have ever been before. Even the troubles commonly associated with urban schools are found only in certain parts of American cities. Elsewhere in the cities, in the suburbs, and in small towns, the typical citizen is satisfied that the majority of children

are being well and effectively educated.

What such optimism overlooks, of course, is that the crises are occurring where the schools are facing--and failing--the most telling tests. To argue that traditional tasks are being performed satisfactorily is no answer at all. It is where the schools confront the most demanding problems that they are in the deepest difficulty. It is at these points that we make a mockery of the principles on which our society has long been said to rest. It is here that the failure of the schools could undermine the social order. To say that all is well except in a few rough spots is like saying that a little fire--or a small cancer--never hurt anybody.

Sir Eric Ashby, Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University and a student of university development, makes the point that an institution is the embodiment of an ideal and that to survive it must fulfill two conditions: It must be sufficiently stable to sustain the ideal which gave it birth, and sufficiently responsive to remain relevant to the society which supports it.

In the historical evidence supporting that generalization we can find cause for deep concern. To a substantial degree, the public schools in our central cities are failing on both counts. The ideal that gave birth to the American public school system is that all American children should enjoy equal opportunity. For vast numbers of those children, the meaning of that magnificent assertion is utterly invisible

in the schools they now attend. Nor can we claim with any validity that our schools are sufficiently responsive to remain relevant to the clear needs of the cities that support them.

In the whole American credo no tenet is more firmly fixed than our devotion to equal opportunity. We cite it constantly as the fundamental principle in the whole structure of public education. We assert with great pride that in our schools every American child finds his birthright of opportunity and gets the start that will enable him to make his way as a free man in a free land. But now we are beginning to see that equality of educational opportunity is not enough. The schools must be viewed as the principal instrument by which we enable our children to come to maturity prepared to compete on fair terms in an open society. Because children begin life--even in this most affluent of societies--with such wide diversity of advantages and handicaps, it is not enough that schools be equal. That is obviously and necessarily a first step, but our sights must be fixed on devising whatever means are required to enable every child to develop to the maximum whatever potentiality he possesses. Whatever his possibilities, wherever he begins, the school, in company with other agencies, is obligated not only to do the best it presently can, but to muster the ingenuity and the dedication to do what is necessary. The time has come to provide--as a matter of deliberate public policy--whatever exceptional, unequal

education a child needs in order to assure he, too, will enter the adult world with a fair start.

Much attention has been given in the last two years to James Coleman's massive study, "Equality of Educational Opportunity." Discussion has usually focused on the data showing that Negro children achieve better in integrated schools than in segregated ones. The finding of the study that may ultimately turn out to be the most significant, however, is that students who have a sense of control over their own destiny do better than those who are convinced that their own actions have little to do with what happens to them. Coleman has only documented what good teachers everywhere know--that a good school is one where children know they are welcome and respected; where every day they experience some measure of success; and where they are constantly reminded that what they do does really make a difference. We must make up our minds--not after another investigation and ten more pilot projects with acronoymic titles, but <u>now</u>--to create more schools like that in every city. It is not the ideal of equal opportunity that needs changing but the mechanisms we use to serve it.

The connection between the ideal of equal opportunity and the value we place on the local control of schools in this country is by no means accidental. It relates directly to Ashby's point that, to survive, an institution must remain faithful to the ideal it embodies, while simultaneously it responds to shifting circumstances. We invented

and have retained our system of local school control because it offers the most reliable means of assuring that schools will be responsive--responsive to the needs of society and the needs of children. With appropriate regard for other sources of wisdom we have long believed that the purposes of schools should be largely determined by parents and other citizens who are nearest to the schools. It is precisely because so many parents and other citizens close to them now find the schools unresponsive that a state of crisis has become chronic in many of our city systems.

The ultimate test of any school system is found not in its organization chart, its curriculum guides, or its professional personnel policies. The only evidence that finally matters is what actually happens tc individual children in particular schools. Here, in the school, is where the individual student receives or is denied the opportunity that is his birthright. Here the parent finds or is refused a sympathetic relationship with the public servants who have been employed to teach his children. Here the student experiences the concern, the warmth, the empathy, the skill, the understanding, that distinguish the teacher from the time-server. It is in the classroom, subject as it always is to the emotional climate of the school, that a pupil acquires or fails to acquire that critically important sense of his own possibilities, his importance as a person, his responsibility to his fellows and to the larger world. It is here that he gains or fails to gain a personal

awareness of the relevance of learning and the significance of knowledge that is the beginning of intellectual growth. In the way it nurtures his view of himself, his world and his place within it, the school can determine not only whether the student will become an educated person, but whether he is even to be a free and self-respecting human being.

There are public schools that meet these criteria, but few of them are in the central cities--and the black ghettos have almost none. The faith that with appropriate action they could be achieved is the main force behind the drive for more localized power over local schools. Not every ghetto resident wants more of such power, and in some neighborhoods the degree of satisfaction is fairly high. Last summer, for example, in a study by the Center for Urban Education in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of New York, a third of those interviewed rated the schools "good" and another third thought they were at least "fair." About half thought that parents should have some voice in the selection or transfer of teachers or principals.

It may well be true that the insistence on a larger measure of neighborhood autonomy comes from a relatively small number of articulate and agressive spokesmen. It is also possible that it comes from those who are most sensitive to advantages of good schools and the crippling consequences of poor ones. What can not be disputed is that the typical ghetto school is less well staffed, equipped, and supported

than it must be to meet its responsibilities. Neither can it be denied that the curricula, the teaching procedures, and the supplementary services in these schools are on the whole failing to respond as they should to the clear needs of the children. The immediate question is whether those needs are more likely to be met by giving local parents and citizens a greater voice in setting policies, selecting staffs, and evaluating results.

With rare exceptions the best schools in this country are found where local citizens close to them have a hand and a voice in their establishment and control. State and national influences are important factors, as are large city boards and administrators, but it is neighborhood opinion and power that usually produce the most significant differences in school quality. A principal issue in respect to ghetto schools is whether the risks of segregation overbalance the probable advantages of local identification and initiative.

Given the current state of race relations in the United States, I am persuaded that the arguments in honor of more local control are stronger than those against it.

This is not to say that segregation should be our goal. It is to say that before racial integration is likely to produce the benefits it could yield, black Americans must have greater opportunities to assert their own preferences, to control their own destinies, to manage their own affairs. In this sense the use of Black Power can be beneficial not

only to the Negro but to all Americans. The common task for all of us is to devise ways, in the governance of schools and other fields, to recognize the integrity of particular groups without denying the members of any group free access to the larger community. Translated into the language of educational policy and school administration, this could mean the establishment of districts within cities, or in metropolitan areas, with substantial internal autonomy but with full opportunity for students and staff members to move between districts; and with sustained communication and cooperation among these units, in programs and services.

The fact that a particular community happens to be populated largely by one race is no reason to deny the right of its people to make their own decisions, so long as those decisions are within the principles commonly accepted by a broader jurisdiction. This balance should be no more difficult to attain within a large city than within a state.

The problem, I am convinced, is less one of political organization than of readiness to adopt more flexible patterns of operation and relationships. Much of what is needed can be attained--indeed must be found--in the individual school.

To assure and encourage the necessary level of initiative and responsiveness in the school, we shall need something other than a redesigned chart of systemwide administrative controls. We shall need a truly radical conception of decentralization, for what is involved is

creating means by which principals and faculties can obtain from their communities--far more regularly than they do now--both their signals and their rewards.

One way to bring this about would be to establish a group of parents and other citizens in every school, to work with the principal and teachers in devising more effective ways to find and interpret the needs of the community, and of its children; and to translate that interpretation into improved programs. Such a group could advise the school staff on educational priorities and objectives, on curriculum development, and on the types of services most likely to aid the students. It could submit to the local school board--at least annually--its appraisal of the school's success in meeting the problems which the community considers important.

Obviously, in such an arrangement there would be opportunities for error, and even for abuse. For this reason, where opinions differ significantly, the staff should also be free to express its views. Suitable safeguards would be required to avoid issuing statements that might be personally damaging; but the more general aspects of the appraisals should be made public.

Such a plan could have another important value. Since a normal obligation of every public school is to respond to its community's needs, it should become an unwritten rule and in time an officially adopted policy that no member of the professional staff will be selected or approved for

promotion without a record of satisfactory accomplishment in the community in which he works. To allow for the probability that in any human situation difficulties may arise that reflect no personal failure, and since it may be presumed that at times teachers could be the victims of bias and bigotry, allowance for such contingencies would be necessary. It should, therefore, be relatively easy for a staff member who is not succeeding in one community to be transferred to another without prejudice. But, until he has demonstrated that in addition to customary professional qualifications he possesses the disposition and competence to respond well to community problems, no staff member should be eligible for a position of greater responsibility. Those who--after a reasonable number of chances--still fail to display a suitable capacity to respond to the people from whom they have accepted employment should be encouraged to take their talents elsewhere. With due process and humane treatment for all concerned, the inept should be discharged.

It is not enough for the community to have the power to set the tasks for its schools. When those tasks are well performed, the community should also be able to reward those responsible. The advisory group I am suggesting should therefore single out, for special attention and praise, staff members who render especially meritorious service to their pupils and their communities. The recognition and reward might range from a simple citation to public applause, or to additional pay or promotion. Here, too, I recognize

inherent danger, for cheap popularity is not to be confused with distinguished performance; but the risk in that direction seems to me far less than the risk of maintaining personnel practices that, purporting to be objective, often turn out to be irrelevant.

So long as members of the school staff know that the principal source of approval and promotion is at the central headquarters, it is to that "community" that they will look for appraisal and recognition. As the typical city system now operates there is little incentive for a principal or a teacher to be deeply concerned about what his local community expects of him. So far as his professional progress is concerned, that community possesses neither carrot nor stick. The lines of authority, stimulation, and reward now center at a single point. Until that situation is altered and the local community is given a larger voice in setting expectations for the professional staff and rewarding their attainment, most other schemes for placing the control of schools in the hands of local citizens will remain exercises in futility and largely an illusion. We should be under no illusion, however, about the difficulty of putting such a scheme into effect. It is easy to predict the dire warnings about self-seeking groups that would use the schools for their own purposes. It will be said that teachers and other staff members are too insecure to agree to any such plan. Certainly it will produce new administrative difficulties, and it will play havoc with customary operating procedures.

But neither should we retain any illusion about the almost certain results of protecting the present state of affairs. Unless city schools become much more responsive than they now are to the needs of their local communities, we must expect grave consequences.

The issues before us are complex and difficult. Resolving them will call for clear vision, bold initiative, consummate artistry in conciliation, and no little courage. Above all, the accomplishment of the tasks we are discussing depends on faith in people and in the power of education.

There is nothing easy about this job, but it happens to be essential. The future of this country will be so crucially affected by the way it is done, that--if it is bungled--the final third of this century could be ruined for most Americans.